

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone: Jan. 4-6
Catahoula Lake: Jan. 5
NE LA: Jan. 5, NW LA: Jan. 15
Scaup survey: Jan. 13

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Estimates made from Aircraft

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	67,000	3,000	**	70,000
MOTTLED	18,000	19,000		37,000
GADWALL	285,000	216,000	**	501,000
WIGEON	2,000	1,000	**	3,000
GW TEAL	194,000	86,000		280,000
BW TEAL	58,000	53,000		111,000
SHOVELER	290,000	10,000	**	300,000
PINTAIL	46,000	9,000	**	56,000
TOTAL DABLERS	960,000	397,000	**	1,357,000
SCAUP	114,000	84,000	**	198,000
RINGNECKED	98,000	148,000	16,000	262,000
CANVASBACK	2,000	8,000	22,000	32,000
TOTAL DIVERS	214,000	240,000	38,000	492,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,174,000	637,000	38,000	1,849,000
COOTS	357,000	761,000	**	1,118,000

**Estimate is less than 1,000

COMMENTS:

The 1.85 million ducks estimated on this survey is only 70% of the December survey total of 2.64 million, only 55% of last January's total of 3.38 million, and is about 39% lower than the most recent 5-year average of 2.97 million and the long-term average of 3.03 million. It is the lowest January

estimate since 2009's total of 1.59 million, the lowest on record for this survey. It is the 5th lowest January survey estimate, exceeding those of 1983, 1987, and 2008 as well as 2009. It is not typical for estimates of total ducks to decline from December to January (see Figure 1 below), especially to such a degree. However, despite some flashes of winter, temperatures in December were warmer than average, regular rainfall has maintained widespread available flooded habitat, and birds have clearly dispersed from the surveyed region. The biggest changes from December were the big declines in ring-necked ducks (639,000 to 148,000) in southeast Louisiana and gadwalls (807,000 to 501,000) across the entire coast. All diving duck species estimates declined from December, estimates for mallards and green-winged teal increased slightly, and the estimate for shovelers doubled, owing to a very large concentration seen on a sewage lagoon near Rayne. Shovelers and blue-winged teal were the only dabblers at or above long-term January averages. Despite the large decline from December, ring-necked ducks were above long-term January average as were scaup. The mallard estimate of 70,000 is the second lowest on record; only the 59,000 in 2009 is lower. It is far lower than the 5-year and long-term averages for mallards on this survey, which are 145,000 and 363,000 respectively.

Due to the large decline in birds counted in SE LA, (the total in SW LA is essentially the same as in December), about 2/3 of the ducks in coastal Louisiana were seen in SW LA. The only concentrations in SW LA were seen on Lacassine NWR and a sewage lagoon near Rayne. A very large concentration of geese, primarily snow geese, was noted in the agricultural fields north of White Lake WCA. Some sizeable flocks of dabbling ducks and regular smaller flocks of scaup were noted off-shore between lines south of Pecan Island. Neither geese nor off-shore flocks of ducks are included in the estimates. Although far fewer than in December, the largest concentration of ducks seen in SE LA was in the marshes of Upper Terrebonne Parish. Catahoula Lake remains flooded far above management targets, few dabbling ducks were seen, and the 38,000 diving ducks was less than half the 80,000 counted in December. It is the fewest ducks counted in Catahoula Lake in January since the record low of 3,000 in 2009.

During the time of this survey, water levels in most coastal marshes remain higher than optimal for feeding waterfowl. There is abundant flooded habitat in the agricultural regions, and SAV is still evident in many marsh habitats across the coast. Water levels in areas near the Mississippi River were exceedingly high, and far lower than normal bird use was noted.

The decline in ducks counted from December to January was even greater on the NE Louisiana survey, where only 106,000 ducks and 88,000 geese were counted on selected habitats. That is less than a third of the 363,000 ducks and 199,000 geese counted in December. The big concentrations south of Grand Cote and between Bonita and Mer Rouge were gone, and the largest groups of ducks were counted east of Ouachita WMA (although far fewer than in December), and at Catahoula NWR. Most abundant species were gadwall, shoveler, and ring-necked duck. Extensive flooded agricultural habitat was evident and there was extensive flooding in the major river systems.

Similarly, on the scaup survey of Lakes Pontchartrain, Maurepas and Borgne, the scaup estimate declined from 78,000 in December to 48,000 on this survey. This is higher than the 23,000 estimated last January but far lower than the 733,000 in 2014 and the 10-year average of 187,000. The scaup population on this survey is highly variable, and over the past 10 years, 5 surveys have results in higher estimates and 5 have resulted in lower estimates than 48,000.

Contrary to large declines in ducks seen in coastal Louisiana, Catahoula Lake, NE LA, and on the scaup survey, 11,300 ducks were counted in NW LA, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. That is a 15% increase from the December survey, but is markedly lower than the 16,600 counted last January and the 13,500 counted in 2014. Gadwall (2,700), green-winged teal (1,700), shoveler (1,600), mallard (1,600), and pintail (1,400) were the most abundant species, and the largest numbers were seen between locks 4 and 5 on the Red River, managed

impoundments near Loggy Bayou, and the Yates Tract of Red River NWR. Habitat conditions were similar to December with extensive flooding along the Red River creating pools of shallow-flooded habitat not typically seen on this survey.

Mid-winter waterfowl surveys in other states, and communication with colleagues showed Arkansas' estimate was below average; Mississippi's about average, Missouri's was twice the most recent 5-year average, and Tennessee and Kentucky are reporting above average number of ducks. Extensive shallow flooding is evident over broad expanses of the Mississippi Flyway from southern Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and all southern states. Combined with far warmer than average temperatures, the winter distribution of ducks this January appears to have shifted northward.

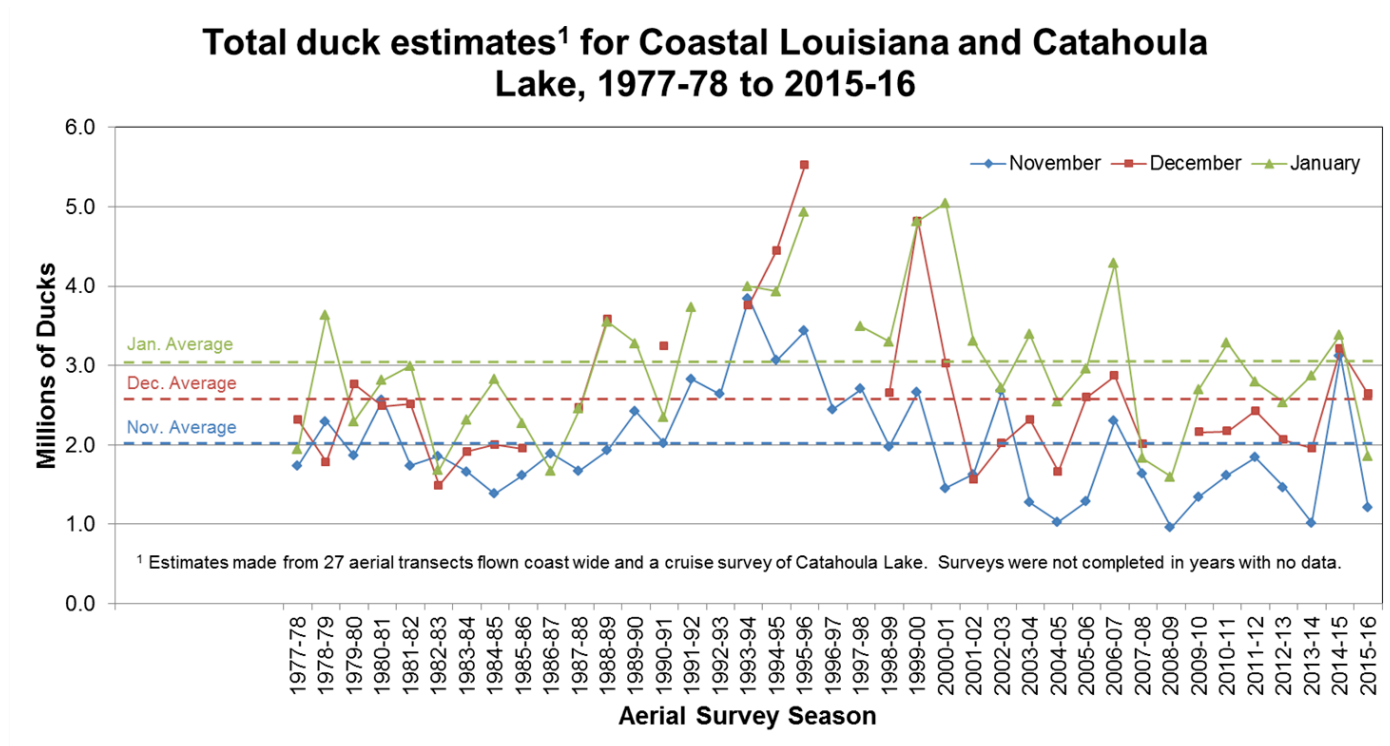


Figure 1. Trends in total ducks counted on November, December, and January aerial waterfowl surveys 1977-2016.